

Commentary: It is Fashionable to Plan — Again.

By JUDI BARRETT

Apparently, it is also fashionable to massage data and substitute polemics for reason — as evidenced by current arguments over a new master plan and the zoning changes it may generate. Today's master plan dispute strikes a vaguely familiar chord, however, for Duxbury visited similar terrain not so long ago. When stripped

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of all the rhetoric and posturing, town planning is really an exercise in social engineering, disguised by such terms as "saving place," "preserving town character," and "managing growth." On the basis of that lone common denominator, it's time to put the new master plan in perspective — and then put it on the shelf, where it belongs right next to its antecedent, the 1969 Comprehensive Plan.

About 35 years ago, community planning was in vogue not because ordinary people necessarily believed in it but rather, because the federal government made master plan grants available to cities and towns across the country. One of the many grants-in-aid that attended centralized federalism in the early 1960s, planning funds from Washington were part of a new, larger national agenda that depended on state and local compliance. When air and water pollution, the loss of wildlife habitat and incessant noise became matters of broad public concern,

federal authorities added environmental quality to a litany of other national goals and increased their support for master plan grants, which Congress originally funded to keep cities from bulldozing old neighborhoods.

Indeed, the *absence* of master or "comprehensive" plans, together with persistent racism and the legacy of Robert Moses's grand highway schemes, had replaced pockets of urban blight with pockets of urban renewal during the post-World War II decade. To the 1960s makers of master plan grants for cities and towns, "clearance" and "urban renewal" represented the tragic consequences of failing to plan when planning might have made a difference. Along with protecting natural resources and restoring or preserving the past instead of destroying it, smart planning for the future would save money in the long run and produce what today's planners call "livable communities."

Still another factor behind federal sponsorship of master plan grants was suburbanization, which began to raise all sorts of political, economic and transportation problems just as television was glamorizing suburban family life in *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show*. To public policy analysts of the day, the problems partially stemmed from patchwork development rules and unsophisticated zoning techniques that spawned lot-by-lot land use change, epitomized in Levittown, New York. Fascinated by such experimental planning endeavors as Reston, Virginia, which moved from the drawing boards

to reality in the early 1960s, both land use and policy planners imagined that the American landscape could be saved if only someone would pay professionals to intervene before laymen in local government ruined everything.

Owing to the popularity of such books as Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* and Herbert

Gans's *The Urban Villagers*, planners gained a constituency in Congress for new ideas about the meanings of "community," the necessity of good planning and bluntly, the money to pay for it. Master planning occupied one trajectory of community development in the 1960s; federally funded programs like Model Cities occupied another. In many ways, what we call "sustainable development" today is actually dusted-off and rewritten discourse from the same period. Wolfe von Eckardt spoke for a generation of like-minded planners, architects, engineers and social scientists

Duxbury Comprehensive Plan

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in a famous 1964 essay in *The New Republic*: "The primary need of the Great Society is not just to build new towns, but to build an environment in which a civilization can grow."

Duxbury got its share of federal planning funds near the end of the "701" program and in 1969, the Planning Board adopted a comprehensive plan that eventually put the town on the map of forward thinking (read: civilized) communities. Beleaguered by skyrocketing numbers of new single-family homes, new families and the school construction demands that fol-

lowed, Duxbury decided to try something different. The outcome was a novel yet contested zoning bylaw that focused less on reducing population growth and the number of housing units than on changing the housing mix and in turn, the population make-up of the town. The bylaw's centerpiece, the planned unit development (PUD), seemed to promise better land use on one hand and fiscal advantages on the other. Along with its guarantee of creative architecture and more open space, the PUD was (and remains) a social engineering tool for communities that use it: on balance, it attracts small (usually childless) households and curbs growth in the budget

item that dwarfs all other municipal expenditures, public education.

Whether residents agreed with or opposed the bylaw that most town meeting voters approved in 1975, outsiders thought of Duxbury as bold and visionary and they hoped success here might persuade other towns to follow suit. Federal funds for master plans disappeared by the early-1970s, leaving many communities to pluck ideas at random from the menu of creative zoning techniques that would never have spread as they did without Washington's 20-year investment first in "workable programs" for urban renewal and later, city or town plans. Planned plucking soon gave way to politicized plucking. Before long, cities and towns were taking what they liked and leaving the rest, often failing to consider whether their zoning guesswork had a prayer of producing coherent development outcomes.

The planning profession also changed. Veterans of the "general plan" years had to find new markets for their knowledge or sell life insurance. Many of them were forced to specialize as a game of "follow the money" turned them into environmental planners, housing planners, historic preservation planners, economic development planners and so forth. Some became developers, made their fortunes and never left the private sector thereafter. Others found a niche in university planning departments or think tanks, joined the intellectual left and became advocacy planners.

A few retained their practices primarily as master or

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comprehensive plan consultants. One of them is John Brown, whom the Planning Board hired to produce a new master plan that is as controversial as its predecessor was in 1969. The controversy is not Brown's fault, and if the truth were known the town was lucky to get him for the embarrassingly low \$50,000 or so that was available for his contract.

Predictably, today's Planning Board is about to abandon the very blueprint that the Zoning Bylaw's "Framers" worked so hard to create and sell 24 years ago. Although theoretically interesting, the existing bylaw is hardly sacred and it has been almost devoid of practical value since the mid-1980s when the Zoning Board of Appeals sent a message — intended or not — that the PUD was no longer welcome here. Town officials who understood the bylaw and all of its intricacies disappeared ages ago, taking with them what little capacity Duxbury ever had to administer a complicated PUD technical review system. In fact, very few proposals went through the rigorous fiscal impact analysis that was supposed to help the town negotiate with developers over the number of housing units that would be allowed in each PUD.

If Duxbury lacks the capacity or will to administer the current zoning bylaw, then the Planning Board should call it a day and revert to the passé practice of endorsing subdivision pods lined with single-family trophy houses. Some towns cannot handle anything more demanding than a conventional subdivision approval process; perhaps ours is now one of them. But if the rationale for changing the bylaw lies with bad information, faulty reasoning or a hidden political agenda, the Planning Board is wrong.

At issue is the master plan's "build-out analysis," a term that refers to how much develop-

ment will occur before there is no land left to develop. According to the new plan, Duxbury "could" become a town of almost 27,000 residents, 10,082 housing units, 645,600 square feet of commercial space and 114,900 square feet of industrial space. The method by which these numbers were derived is as passé as grid subdivisions, but the low budget for Brown's work helps to explain how limited data and oversimplification could produce such refutable projections.

In fairness, there are several ways to conduct a build-out analysis in the planning field. They generally fall into two categories. One is cheap, easy and tends to create high-range growth estimates. The other costs more, is complex and time consuming, and often produces lower-range growth estimates. Both are highly subjective; their validity depends on making reasoned assumptions and testing the results against a community's actual development history. Anyone who uses either approach has a duty to explain the limitations.

Duxbury seems to have relied on free data from the state (the cheap method, also used by most regional planning agencies), which in turn relies on data from land use mapping that has been updated periodically since the early 1950s. By converting aerial photographs and zoning maps to electronic data "layers" that can be viewed and analyzed with Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, planners can estimate the amount of unused, theoretically developable land in a community and allocate the land to zoning districts. Using each district's development rules, it becomes possible to estimate how many house lots and how much commercial and industrial space could be created. Under this method, Duxbury ends up with 27,000 residents — someday, maybe, if every blade of grass and every tree gives way to human

beings and every housing unit holds about 2.67 people.

The other build-out methods involve linking the assessors property database with the zoning map. Assessing maps yield what aerial photographs cannot: information about each and every parcel in the community. The sophistication of GIS makes it possible to identify a myriad of opportunities to divide, reconfigure and combine parcels, which sheds far more light on what can actually be done with the community's mass of open land. This method tends to produce lower growth estimates because it allows for a refined land analysis and eliminates distortions caused by simply dividing a large amount of open land (total unused acreage) as though it were one big parcel, which of course it is not. Whether the lower estimates are more accurate is open to debate. Sometimes analysts assume that certain parcel combinations are too unlikely to worry about — until the town ends up with a 25-lot subdivision precisely where one seemed impossible.

Methodological questions abound, but so do political ones. The new master plan's population estimate assumes that all unused land zoned for PUDs will produce PUD projects, which usually involve more — but for the most part *smaller* — housing units than conventional single-family subdivisions do. First, there is no historical basis for arguing that Duxbury's PUD-zoned land will be used only for PUD's: if it hasn't been in the past, what is the rationale for claiming that

it will be in the future? Second, it takes little effort to see that 26,877 people divided by 10,082 housing units equals 2.67 persons per unit. Does the Planning Department have any independent, verifiable data that show how a *mix* of 10,082 townhouses, single-family homes and garden apartments can sustain an average of 2.67 occupants?

Currently available state data show that overall, *new* single-family homes produce .89 school-age children while townhouses produce only .25 and garden apartments, .16. Perhaps Duxbury's PUD's (Bay Farm, Oceanwoods, Southscape and others) have historically generated children at a rate similar to that found in single-family home developments. If the Planning Department can demonstrate that Duxbury's townhomes and garden apartments attract larger households than the same kinds of units do elsewhere in Massachusetts — especially in comparable, affluent, highly desirable towns like ours (they really do exist) — then the estimated build-out population of 26,877 people would make considerable sense. Why? Because the Planning Department would be able to prove what is now purely speculative: Duxbury is unique.

It is one thing to make "worst case" estimates and quite another to ignore probability. Most Duxbury residents (and apparently most town officials) have no idea whether the Planning Board is using good numbers or bad numbers, but no one has

enough information to evaluate arguments made by the master plan's opponents, either. The opponents allege that the Planning Board has pushed a panic button in order to justify radically curtailing the potential for PUD or multi-unit housing in Duxbury. For its part, the Planning Department feels obligated to tell townspeople what "could" happen under current zoning rules. The Planning Department should feel equally obligated to quantify and report what is *probable*, but doing so requires research and demands a level of analysis that has either not been done or has not been disclosed to the public.

Officials in policy positions, elected or appointed, paid or unpaid, need to subordinate their own will to faith that rational, informed voters will make rational, informed decisions. Surely, the Planning Board won't ask town meeting to make sweeping development policy changes on the basis of vague "could happen" outcomes. Surely, the Planning Board will do — or will pay John Brown to do — the necessary homework so that townspeople can compare "could" to "probable," "worst case" to a "historical trend analysis," thereby removing any appearance of a political agenda from the pages of the new master plan. Surely, the Planning Board will protect the integrity of the planning process, diffuse the negativity of its antagonists, tone down the rhetoric and present a build-out analysis that balances conjecture with history.

Surely, I am dreaming.